
A lost Generation in All Quiet in the Western Front

In the novel, All Quiet on the Western Front, Erich Maria Remarque demonstrates, through the character of Paul Baumer, how war has obliterated almost an entire generation of men. Because these men no longer retain a place in life and are incapable of relating with former generations, they are collectively referred to in history as the "lost generation." Remarque emphasizes Paul's leave and the linguistic differences between the two generations to show how Paul comes to the realization that he is part of this lost generation.

Ironically, Paul's leave is unfortunate, yet serves an important purpose in showing how far apart Paul has grown from his family and past youth. During his leave, Paul learns of his incapability in communicating with former generations due to his war experiences. Remarque shows that Paul no longer feels any relation with civilian life as soon as Paul enters his hometown. For example, when Paul gets off the train, he encounters a redcross sister who calls him "comrade," but he thinks to himself: "...I will have none of it" (156). Paul replies in this negative manner because he feels angered by her attempt to associate with him by calling him a "comrade." Paul knows that only soldiers at the front can call each other comrades since they have experienced the brutality of war together. By calling Paul a comrade, she represents the former generation's misuse of language because she does not know the true meaning of camaraderie in war, but tries to use it anyway.

This lack of association with civilian life Paul feels carries over into his house. When his mother greets him, he immediately realizes he cannot say anything: "We say very little and I am thankful that she asks nothing. What ought to I say?" (159). This serves as a sign showing Paul's loss of communication with former generations, for even when his mother then asks him about the front: "Was it very bad out there, Paul?" (161), he replies with compassion by saying: "No, Mother, not so very. There are always a lot of us together so it isn't so bad" (161). However, the main reason he does this is not to protect his mother from fear, but because he is aware that the effort in trying to explain to her the horrors of war would be useless. If he tried to describe what he has experienced on the front to her, she could not possibly comprehend his descriptions of his pain and suffering. Also, putting these experiences into words provides a challenge to Paul, as the language of war would be meaningless and empty to the former generation. However, by not telling the truth, he deepens the gap between him and his mother. During the course of his leave, Paul is also reluctant to speak to his father about the war. This shows a further movement away from the past and more into his isolated and lost generation.

Remarque also uses even the smallest incidents on Paul's leave to show how Paul notices the generation gap. Paul's father asks Paul to keep his army uniform on, but Paul refuses because

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he sees no purpose in doing so. When Paul puts on his "civilian" clothes, he notices they have grown too tight and that he cannot fit properly into them. These clothes represent his old civilian life, and, similarly, just as he cannot fit into his clothes, he also cannot fit back into his former social role. Because of these various incidents, Paul realizes that things will never be that same again with both his parents. Paul faces similar difficulties when he encounters other members of his hometown: "They are different men here, men I cannot properly understand..." (169). Again, he cannot relate to these people, who have been disillusioned by the war because, he suggests, they have not truly experienced it as Paul has. He realizes that their language contains nothing but emptiness; thus, it serves no purpose to his generation since it does not accurately portray the reality of war and the inner experiences of those who have lived it.

In addition to not being able to communicate with his family, he also loses a connection with his youth. Remarque develops the idea of how Paul has also lost his youth through the butterfly collection and old books. Paul recalls his old butterfly collection: "Above me on the wall hangs the glass case with coloured butterflies that once I collected" (158). The hard glass case keeps the butterflies, which symbolize Paul's youth and innocence, preserved. However, he cannot reach in and touch the butterflies just like his youth because of the hard case around the butterflies. War has created a similar hard case around Paul, which holds him back from being able to integrate back into his former self and society in general. He also attempts to seek his youth through books: "I want that quiet rapture again. I want to feel the same powerful, nameless urge that I used to feel when I turned to my books. The breath of desire...shall fill me again...it shall bring back again that lost eagerness of my youth" (171). The books also symbolize the older, more peaceful time, in which the innocent Paul possessed hopes and goals to lead a happy life. However, he realizes that his efforts to relate to his past are abortive because of how much war has broken him apart from his former youth, so he turns away despondently. The books are now useless because the words in them are empty and meaningless to Paul and his generation. The pre-enlistment world becomes even more alien to Paul, as when he thinks to himself: "A terrible feeling of foreignness suddenly rises up in me. I cannot find my way back, I am shut out though I entreat earnestly and put forth all my strength" (172). Even with full effort, he cannot engender any sort of connection with his past youth due to the recent experiences with the horrors and other realities of war.

Paul feels further lost as the days proceed one another during his leave. Near the end of his leave, Remarque creates a very significant scene between Paul and his mother as Paul sadly pleads: "Ah! Mother, Mother! how can it be that I must part from you? Who else is there that has any claim on me but you? Here I sit and there you are lying; we have so much to say, and we shall never say it" (184). This is the ultimate scene where Paul gives a final farewell to his mother and her generation. Paul feels as if there is so much he has to say to her, but he cannot because she can no longer relate to his language. Paul's generation has lost its dreams, hopes, youth, innocence, and everything else it may have possessed in its former life. It dreads the

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times during war just as much as the thought of what to do during post-war era because of the generation gap. Paul realizes that life will never be the same again and that he does not belong anywhere because of the brutal war.

Remarque's use of Paul's leave shows how Paul learns that he is part of the lost generation. Through the interaction with his family members, Paul realizes that he no longer fits in with them and never will be able to. Because of the war, Paul's generation has lost the idea of a meaningful world in which compassion exists for the individual. This entire generation of men is incapable of integrating back into society and no longer retains a place in collective life; thus, it is referred to in history as the lost generation.

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